**Robert Browning "My Last Duchess"**

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf’s hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

Will ‘t please you sit and look at her? I said

‘Frà Pandolf’ by design, for never read

Strangers like you that pictured countenance,

The depth and passion of its earnest glance,

But to myself they turned (since none puts by

The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)

And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,

How such a glance came there; so, not the first

Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ‘t was not

Her husband’s presence only, called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek: perhaps

Frà Pandolf chanced to say, ‘Her mantle laps

Over my lady’s wrist too much,' or ‘Paint

Must never hope to reproduce the faint

Half-flush that dies along her throat:' such stuff

Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough

For calling up that spot of joy. She had

A heart -- how shall I say? -- too soon made glad,

Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er

She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

Sir, ‘t was all one! My favour at her breast,

The dropping of the daylight in the West,

The bough of cherries some officious fool

Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule

She rode with round the terrace -- all and each

Would draw from her alike the approving speech,

Or blush, at least. She thanked men, -- good! but thanked

Somehow -- I know not how -- as if she ranked

My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name

With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame

This sort of trifling? Even had you skill

In speech -- (which I have not) -- to make your will

Quite clear to such an one, and say, ‘Just this

Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,

Or there exceed the mark’ -- and if she let

Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set

Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,

-- E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose

Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,

Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without

Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;

Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands

As if alive. Will ‘t please you rise? We’ll meet

The company below then. I repeat,

The Count your master’s known munificence

Is ample warrant that no just pretence

Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;

Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed

At starting, is my object. Nay, we’ll go

Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,

Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,

Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

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**At a Glance**

1. The speaker of this dramatic monologue is a duke addressing the emissary of a count. The Duke is negotiating a marriage to the Count's daughter.

2. The Duke shows the commissioned painting of his first wife. The painting is kept hidden behind a curtain that is drawn aside only by the Duke.

3. The Duke tells the envoy the tale of his first wife. She was equally pleased by everything and by everybody; her pleasure had a passionate earnestness to it.

4. The Duke's story ends with his ambiguous statement that he "gave orders" resulting in his wife's ultimate silence. This suggests she was murdered.

5. The Duke discusses his demands for a dowry and his statue of the god Neptune taming a fragile, innocent seahorse. The statue is symbolic of himself and his first young bride.

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**Poem Summary**

Lines 1-2

The beginning note is meant to explain to that the speaker of the poem is the Duke of Ferrara; this provides the reader with location (Italy) and class environment (aristocratic). In the opening lines Browning sets the scene for the poem, focusing the reader’s imagination on the painting on the wall. The central premise of the poem is put in place: the dead wife will appear to come back to life only through the artistry of the picture. Through this, Browning allows the reader to begin to think of the woman as a real person, once very much alive, and initiates a “relationship” between the dead woman and the reader. Once the reader begins to feel sympathy for the woman, then the subsequent “reasons” given by the Duke concerning her “imperfections” will seem all the more outrageous.

Lines 3-4

Here, Browning accomplishes two things: a) an emphasis on the mastery of the artist, “Frà Pandolf,” who created a work of art that makes the dead woman seem so animated; and b) an introduction to the Duke’s subtle, mocking tone with the phrases “piece of wonder” and “busily a day”. These words seem to be heavy with ridicule and scorn for both woman and artist. At this point the reader might begin to think the Duke was jealous of the man who “fussed” over his wife but who, ultimately created—not a masterpiece—but just a portion of one. It should be noted that, unlike some other figures in Browning’s work, Frà Pandolf—and later, Claus of Innsbruck—is an imaginary, not historical, figure.

Line 5

The use of the word “you” informs the reader that there is an immediate addressee within the fiction of the poem; the speaker is not addressing the reader, but another character. More specifically, it indicates that the speaker of the poem, the Duke, is now addressing the emissary directly, asking him to sit and gaze upon picture of the dead woman. The reader may imagine the emissary sitting in a chair while the Duke stands and delivers his speech. In effect, the emissary is now in a subordinate position.

Lines 6-9

The words “by design” imply that the artist is well-known and has some prestige attached to his name. The Duke may want to advertise that it was his own talent for hiring the right artist that was responsible for the “life-like quality” of the picture. The Duke also stresses that all of the painting’s viewers—“strangers like you”—remark upon the painting’s lifelike look. In addition, the Duke appears more taken with the painting than with the real woman the picture represents. The image of emotion—the “passion” in the “glance”—seems more valuable to him than genuine emotion. The use of the word “its” instead of “her” suggests that the Duke has more of a relationship with the painting than he did with his dead wife. With these details, Browning begins to interject the notion of the Duke’s jealousy. That “passionate glance” might have been placed there by the painter, whom the Duke probably sees as a rival for his dead wife’s affection.

Lines 10-13

These lines suggest just how striking the depth and passion of the image are, since apparently all previous viewers have wanted to know what excited the Duchess enough to inspire that look in her eyes. The Duke also betrays his possessiveness and desire for control when he comments that “none puts by / The curtain ... but I.”

Lines 14-15

At this point, Browning suggests more of the Duke’s possessiveness, as he tells the emissary that it wasn’t his presence alone that made his wife happy or caused the “spot of joy,” which may literally have been a blush. The Duke insinuates that this blush must have come to her face from either being in the company of a lover or from her far too impressionable and undiscriminating nature.

Lines 16-21

The Duke begins to offer his guesses at what, aside from some illicit pleasure, might have caused the Duchess to blush. Two readings are possible, turning on the reader’s sense of how seriously the Duke believes in the monk’s vows of celibacy. If the painter was not the Duchess’ lover, then her nature was simply too susceptible to flattery for the Duke’s liking.

Lines 22-34

This section of the poem begins the Duke’s long list of complaints against the Duchess. First and foremost, she was innocent, too easily pleased and impressed. He blames her for not seeing any difference between being the wife of a “great man” and: being able to see the sunset; receiving a bouquet from someone of status below the Duke’s; or riding a white mule. While he thinks it is fine to be courteous (”She thanked men,—good!”), she gave all men the kind of respect that only a man with his family’s rank and distinction deserves.

Lines 35-43

Having recounted the Duchess’s imperfections, the Duke announces that, even though her faults were many, he would not lower himself—“stoop”—by telling her what bothered him. Note how the Duke tries to paint himself as a “plain-spoken” man, one who has no “skill” in “speech.” At this point in the poem, the reader may realize the Duke is well-skilled in the uses of language. The Duke explains that, even if he had the skill to tell the Duchess just how much she disgusted him, he would not have explained to her how and why her actions bothered him. On one hand, he betrays a fear that she would have argued with him: “plainly set / Her wits to yours.” On the other hand, he explains that the very process of having to explain his feelings to her would have constituted a compromise (or “stoop”) to his authority.

Lines 44-48

These lines contain the speaker’s final judgement on the Duchess. The Duke recalls his dead wife’s smile, and how she never reserved her smile for him. The lines “gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together” tell us that the Duke used his power to curb his wife’s friendliness, but the words also leave the details ambiguous. At best, he may have restricted her behavior in a way that dampened her ardor for life; at worst, he may have ordered her assassination. The next lines, with the emphasis on “as if alive,” underscore her death.

Lines 49-53

As the poem draws to a close, the Duke redirects his attention to his upcoming marriage. He tells the emissary that he is certain his future bride’s father will give him a generous dowry. The Duke, however, wants to be seen as a man who is more interested in his fiancée than in any money she might bring to their union. At this point, the reader is unlikely to trust these declarations and is likely to fear for this young woman’s welfare.

Lines 54-56

The poem concludes with the final image of a god, “Neptune,” taming a sea-horse. The image of the powerful god taking control over a creature like a sea-horse demonstrates the relationship between the Duke (Neptune) and the last Duchess (seahorse). It is as if, by pointing out this sculpture to the emissary, the Duke is restating his power over his future bride, as well as his more general power in the world. The final lines emphasize another aspect of that power, showing not just the Duke’s desire to possess rare objects of beauty, but also his ability to do so.

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**Themes**

**Pride**

The speaker’s overbearing pride—or in moral terms, his hubris—is incorporated into the very situation of Browning’s monologue. In it, the Duke addresses an inferior, the emissary of a nobleman (”the Count, your master”) whose daughter he intends to make his second wife. There are financial negotiations at stake—the matter of a dowry that the Duke intends to collect from the Count. In fact, the Duke seems in the process of acquiring in the next Duchess an “object,” to use his own word. But the actual amount of money is not the real issue. The Duke suggests that among noblemen, whose behaviors are governed by “just pretense,” no reasonable monetary request would be denied; the negotiations, then, are in one sense a mere formality. In a second sense, however, money functions symbolically, both in the Duke’s mind and for the reader trying to understand the Duke’s motives. In his world, after all, people can be bought and sold, and the terms of their existence can determined by those like the Duke who possess all the power in a hierarchical society. Thus, the negotiations are really about the conditions under which the Count’s daughter will become the Duke’s wife—conditions that amount to, the Duke suggests, absolute submission to his pride.

To stress this point, the Duke describes the fate of his former wife, his “last duchess.” It is here that we see the juxtaposition of the Duke’s corrupt pride and the Duchess’ pureness. Though he describes her affronts to his arrogant nature, she comes across as a warm and lively woman, one loved by everybody for her ability to enjoy life. Yet her pleasant demeanor evoked jealousy in the Duke: she was “too soon made glad, / too easily impressed: she liked whate’er / she looked on, and her looks went everywhere.” He found it insulting that she equated his “gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name” with “anybody’s gift.” Clinging to his pride, however, he considered it a form of “trifling” to display his resentment or to discuss his feelings with the Duchess—it would have amounted to “stooping,” and the Duke “chose never to stoop.” Instead, he “gave commands,” and the Duchess’ “looks stopped altogether.” Thus, the Duke felt it was better to dispense with the Duchess altogether than to live with a woman whose devotion was not—he believed—focused entirely upon him.

**Art and Experience**

The Duke’s monologue both begins and concludes with the Duke drawing his listener’s attention to works of art: first, the painting of the “last Duchess,” his former wife; in the final lines, a sculpture of the sea-god Neptune taming a “seahorse.” Because of this, the entire monologue—ostensibly about the failings of the late Duchess—is actually couched in the aesthetic terms the Duke applies to human relationships. But precisely what are those terms? On one level, they seem wrapped in the same corrupt arrogance that led to the demise of his first wife. As he exhibits the painting and sculpture, it is clear he wants the listener to admire not so much the works themselves as him. If they are beautiful, such beauty exists as proof of the Duke’s excellent taste and his connections with the best artists of his day. His aesthetic sense, then, is equal to his ambition: he is obsessed with the ownership and control of beauty itself. This is evident in the way he describes the shortcomings of the former Duchess, who was beautiful but refused to be “owned” in such a way, and in his commentary on the Neptune sculpture, which he admires less for its intrinsic value than for the fact it is “thought a rarity” and has been cast by a famous artist “for me.”

On a second level, it becomes clear the Duke’s refined taste as a collector bears no relation to the humanistic qualities of the art itself. In the sculpture, he misses the irony we perceive: that Neptune, “taming” a creature of natural beauty and freedom, is in fact symbolic of the Duke himself. He also fails to understand that his appreciation for the skill with which the Duchess has been rendered on canvas is incongruous with his lack of appreciation for the painting’s real-life subject. In this way, he has not only assigned art a higher place than life—he has also credited to art the qualities it draws from life. Thus, he is able to replace a living wife with a portrait of one: “That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,” he says, “looking as if she were alive.” While he reproaches the woman herself, he deems the painting “a wonder”—a form of perfection that, in his opinion at least, life itself cannot approach.

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**Style**

“My Last Duchess” is written in rhymed iambic pentameter, which maintains an even beat throughout the poem.

Iambic pentameter has been said to be the most natural cadence of the English language. It consists of an iamb, which is two syllables: an unstressed followed by a stressed. An example of an iamb might be the words “a heart,” drawn from the lines: “A heart—how shall I say? too soon made glad.” The rhythm of the first two words can be scanned with emphasis indicating a stressed syllable, and an unstressed syllable:

a heart.

Pentameter means that there are five groups of iambs in a line of poetry; each group is called a foot.

”My Last Duchess” also uses rhymed couplets, meaning that every two lines end with a rhyme. For example, the first two lines of the poem end with the words “wall” and “call.” The poetic device of the rhymed couplet, however, is balanced by the use of enjambment, which creates the more natural cadence of a conversation. This technique also helps to keep the even rhythm of iambic pentameter from sounding too monotonous. The poem interrupts itself—much as the speaker of the poem interrupts himself—by inserting a question here (”how shall I say?”) or a parenthetical comment there “(since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)”. This device also helps to illustrate how the Duke’s true motivations are breaking through the surface of his everyday language.

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